

Lobby conflictology: Crimean aspect

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Long ago, in the XIX century, analyzing Napoleon's mistakes, Stendal bitterly remarked in his biography that should Napoleon have been brought up in an educational institution other than the one subordinated to the government he would have probably understood the strength that is given to the government by public opinion. What was clear enough in the XIX century remains a fact today. Similarly, there is nothing original in the argument that a specific public attitude to a specific issue is formed with the help of the omnipresent mass media. Another simple truth is that nowadays no conflict can escalate and be maintained without a specific role played by the news media.

Therefore, information of some kind, offered to the community, is able to spark a flame in it. So far this country has been spared violent conflicts that have been experienced by a number of other post-totalitarian states. However, one may observe some speculative trends in interpretation of individual events, or dissemination of what can be described as overt misinformation that is potentially able to undermine the social peace.

Such trends are worryingly visible in comparisons and analogies between Chechnya and the Crimea that are sometimes offered by the media. In this context the claims comparing the situation in Chechnya with the situation in the Crimea, and particularly efforts to emphasize the "Crimean Tatar factor" challenge Ukraine's security. Although the theme tends to be rather popular among the Russian media, some Ukrainian newspapers and television sometimes also make them.

Moreover, for quite a long period of time Ukraine has perceived the developments in the Northern Caucasus through Russian interpretations - a fact made possible by immense expansion of the Russian information environment.

Some initial results can already be seen in everyday life. For instance, owners of an apartment in a usual Kyiv block of flats could not sell it, after some five years ago a large Muslim family had settled in an apartment on a lower floor. When potential buyers came to see the apartment and negotiate the price, they would change their mind as soon as they saw Muslim women in the yard, sitting there routinely with their elderly neighbors, and non-Slavic-looking children, playing with their little Ukrainian friends. An unbeatable argument for rejection of the apartment was that potential buyers did not want to live "next to Chechens". Was that what the self-styled "peacemakers" want? The challenge cannot but have an impact on the perceptions of the Ukrainian society. Naturally, the issue of a Crimean "conflict" and the emphasis on the Crimean Tatar there are not limited to media publications and dissemination of claims about "Chechnya in the Crimea" through some media outlets. Yet, such claims do add unnecessary agitation to the public opinion, as it happened, for instance, with a Krymskaya Pravda article of October 19, 1999, with a loud title that read "Shamil! We are with you!" The article claimed that "Vakhabbites" from Chechnya had chosen the Crimea as a base for ideological and physical training of "true Muslims". It also claimed that representatives of Chechen guerrilla commanders had been buying flats for combatants' families in Kerch, Feodosia and some other Crimean towns. Commenting on the information that, obviously, had caused much anxiety among the local population, Crimean Tatar Medjlis chairman Mustafa Dzhemilev, MP, described the publication as a piece of slander. He argued that "there is not a single organization in the peninsula that would be fundamental by nature, and none of the claims made in the article has [been supported by] any proof." The information game gas displayed yet another feature: the attention is being focused constantly on the Crimea as an evidently problematic and potentially ready for conflict; in other words, the information environment is being kept tense so that any escalation could be accepted as a natural development of the situation.

The tendency of making claims about "similarities" between the Chechnya and the Crimea has a political history of its own that started well before the beginning of the modern Chechen war. As the time passed, the anxious attention to the Crimea, a certain weak point of Ukraine, and the Crimean Tatars often seen as a specific "fifth column" in the country, political debates over the issue "migrated" to the information lobby, a certain workshop for shaping news that would ensure the needed public opinion.

The information escalation of debates over the issue of possibility of conflict in the Crimea has its own periods and key actors. At some point the Crimean leadership's separatist stance, supported by some Russian leaders, transformed the Crimea into a powder barrel that was ready to explode any minute. That was not just a specific kind of conflict training for public opinion in the Crimea and beyond, but a threatening political reality for Ukraine. Since then some major changes in the political landscape have

occurred, and the abilities of some political forces to push the Crimea towards Russia have undergone a dramatic transformation, but the general inertia and trends have persisted. Previously overt political plans and expectations have moved to the sphere of an information campaign.

In 1995, Yuri Karmazin, MP and chairman of the ad hoc parliamentary commission on issues of political and legal situation in the Crimea, argued that the climax of the Crimean separatism and the Crimean crisis had been accompanied with the implementation of "a plan to cut off the Crimea from Ukraine, drafted in Sochi in August 1994 by chairman of the Russian State Duma Ivan Rybkin, Andrey Kozyrev, Konstantin Zatulin and chairman of the Crimean Supreme Council Sergey Tsekov" (UNIAN, May 18, 1995). Similarities in development of the Crimean scenario were found in the tragic events in Abkhazia and the Transnistria. However, the plans failed to be transformed into reality. Besides diplomatic efforts, laws and the international community's attention, the developments in the Crimea were greatly influenced by the processes in Russia. Since the end of summer of 1994 Ukraine's northern neighbor has been too busy to deal with Ukraine, as it had to respond to the Chechnya challenge.

The first post-Soviet war in Chechnya started on December 11, 1994. The argument in favor of that interpretation of Russia's relative non-involvement can be seen in statements of an individual who has had direct impact on the formation of the Ukrainian-Russian relations in 1994--1995, namely Konstantin Zatulin, chairman of the State Duma's Committee for CIS Affairs. On March 17, 1995 Zatulin, demanding anti-Ukrainian sanctions in response to the Ukrainian parliament's decision to abolish the Crimean presidency, claimed that the decision proved that Ukraine wished to make use of the situation that "Russia was stuck in Chechnya" (Interfax Ukrainy, March 17, 1995).

Cynical as it sounds, the fact of Russia's "sticking in Chechnya" was among the key factors that then saved the Crimea and Ukraine from a violent conflict. However, the political inertia moved to a new, information domain and developed political vagueness, new emphases and some specific features. The process is still under way. Statements of Russia's new leadership are particularly noteworthy in this context. According to President Vladimir Putin, the Crimean peninsula is of major geopolitical importance. Speaking at the G-7 plus Russia summit in Okinawa, Putin referred to a "curve of instability" stretching from Philippines to Kosovo and passing through the Crimea. Mr. Putin, however, is not alone in voicing such "global" observations. Talking about an "instability curve" and geopolitical significance of the Crimea are among favorite topics addressed by Leonid Grach, chairman of the Crimean parliament and the leader of Crimean communists. Commenting on contemporary geopolitics aspects, Mr. Grach often argues he believes in a prognostic concept of "geopolitical break-up", developed by "political scientists". According to the concept, the "geopolitical break-up" is accompanied with military conflicts and beds of tension, and it passes through the borders of Tajikistan, the Northern Caucasus, and closes at the Balkans. The Crimea, its parliamentary chairman argues, also has a role in the complex hypothetical construction as "crossroads of the East and the West, crossroads of Christianity and the Muslim religion"; therefore, he believes that the peninsula "may sense the cold of the war on itself" too. The "war theme" was developed in further public statements made by Leonid Grach who rightly added that "playing geopolitics results in war..."

A specific feature of Russian media information about the Crimea in the context of "the Chechen trace" or "Muslim extremism" is a search for an "external foe" - personified by Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians - which allows to shift the focus of the information flow towards a broader environment and make regular "injections" of xenophobia to the public opinion simultaneously with successful use of the claim about the pervasive and vicious "Muslim factor" as a threat to Russia's security - extrapolated to include Ukraine. The extrapolation has been made possible by the Ukrainian establishment's and the society's habits to adopt foreign schemes of interpretation of specific events. Naturally, the attitude cannot be beneficial for harmonization of interethnic relations in a state as polyethnic as Ukraine.

In the first war in Chechnya, one of the pieces of misinformation that had apparently been produced by the Russian Federal Counterintelligence Service was the "hot" report about an arrest of V. Sosnovkas, a Latvian citizen, in Chechnya. Reportedly, V. Sosnovkas was "sent to the Crimea in 1992 in order to work as a coordinator of the Crimean Tatar Medjlis" (Interfax-Ukraine, January 13, 1995). The claim was practically instantly refuted by deputy chairman of the Crimean Tatar Medjlis Refat Chubarov who dismissed it as "rude provocation and absurdity". The statement of the Crimean Tatar Medjlis (January 13, 1995) read that "the provocation [was] not only a manifestation of the revenge for the unequivocal support by the Crimean Tatar Medjlis for the Chechen people's just fighting for their independence, nit only the attempt to destabilize the situation in the Crimea and Ukraine, but also the wish to use the so-called Muslim factor for provocative ends."

Although the five-year-old misinformation lacked originality, it had a substantial and lasting impact in the tense situation. More recently, the trend was repeated in late 1999, when a number of information agencies claimed that Chechen representatives had started an active campaign designed to hire

terrorists in Kosovo and the Crimea. The information was also refuted by Mustafa Dzhemilev as "evident provocation". He also announced that in October 1999 the Medjlis had been approached by a group of about 15 Crimean Tatars who intended to go to Chechnya to help the Chechen people in their fighting. "We asked them not to do so, for the Medjlis acts in accordance with the Ukrainian legislation that prohibits participation of Ukrainian citizens in military actions outside this country," Crimean Tatar leader said (Ukraina Moloda, October 30, 1999).

In addition to pumping negative sentiments, distorting reality, causing political implication and achieving a number of ideological objectives, such pieces of misinformation target some clearly economic goals. It may be observed that keen attention to the issues of a "Crimean Tatar threat" and "the spread of Vakhabbism in the Crimea" tend to grow conveniently shortly before summer vacation season, when it is critical to re-direct tourists from the former "all-union resort" to the Russian city of Sochi. An example of this year's portion of such misinformation could be seen in a story about the Crimea broadcast by the NTV Itogi on July 30, 2000. Specifically, the story claimed that Islamic organizations provide Crimean Tatars with all sorts of assistance, including legal advice, and help them to purchase houses and land. It also claimed that Vakhabbism was widespread in the Crimea.

Remarkably, the information was promptly refuted by the Crimean department of the Security Service of Ukraine. The reaction, probably, was caused by the reference to some "relevant special secret services" and could be summarized as denial of spreading any information of the kind.

Paradoxically, the "potential conflict" that may emerge on the peninsula is one of the trump cards for some national and Crimean politicians who use various interpretations to secure a political future for them and feel occupied. Such politicians seek to monopolize the image of political "peacemakers" and judges, defenders of the interethnic peace and predictors. Allegations about the Crimean Tatar "fifth column" and "Vakhabbism and regional extremism" tends to remain unchanged; only some accents are being revised lately.

On 18 March 1995, the Ukrainian parliament abolished all bills of the Crimean Autonomous Republic that contradicted the Ukrainian constitution. One of the changes was the abolition of the Crimean presidency. In this context Ivan Symonenko, MP, announced bluntly: "these actions are in favor of nationalism and bring them further to a new Chechnya. (Interfax Ukrainy, March 18, 1994 Chairman of the Crimean parliament Leonid Grach, quoted above, has his own view on "similarities" between Chechnya and the Crimea. One of his oldest statements using the same rhetoric was made public in 1996. Then his symbols were different: Grach did not blame Crimean Tatars and the Crimean Tatar Medjlis for growing interethnic tension and potential "transmitters" of the conflict; instead, he referred to the peninsula's "criminal forces". In October 1996 he argued that "criminalization of power in the Crimea, with Kyiv's mute agreement, continues. Yet another huge step towards a Chechnya Number 2 has been made. The Crimea is sitting on a powder barrel and, most probably, will close the curve of fire that starts in Tajikistan, goes through Chechnya and ends in Yugoslavia." In January 1998, he made a very similar statement, claiming that "... again and again, [it] has proved preliminary forecasts that there are real forces striving to turn the Crimea into a Chechnya Number 2" (Den, January 28, 1998). The "enemy" and the "real forces" were different, but the general conflict remained. When meeting special OMON-style troopers of the Berkut in May 1999, Leonid Grach anxiously argued that "vehement nationalism, preached and forced upon the Crimea by the Medjlis" pushed the autonomy to deterioration of the political situation that could bring about the saddest possible consequences (Silski Visti, May 5, 1999).

Later on, after the war in the former Yugoslavia and the Kosovo crisis, it became politically "stylish" to bluntly compare the Crimea to Kosovo. The developments there seem to have enriched the vocabulary of some commentators and added to the list of metaphors used by some Ukrainian officials commenting on the situation in the Crimea.

Generally, the situation reminds of smoke - luckily, without fire so far. Yet, due to the regular public claims and the use of metaphors of this kind the theme of "Islamic extremism" - in addition to some political dividends that can be received by self-styled "peacemakers" and "defenders of interethnic harmony" in the Crimea - may become as popular an issue of public opinion as the currently discussed "oligarchs". However, "Find the Vakhabbite!" game may prove to be far more dangerous than media speculations who has privatized a regional energy distribution station or something of the kind.